DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 467 CS 217 771

AUTHOR	Stierer, Barry
TITLE	Mastering Education: A Preliminary Analysis of Academic Literacy Practices within Masters-Level Courses in Education.
INSTITUTION	Open Univ., London (England). Centre for Higher Education Research and Information.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	26p.; Paper presented at the International Conference of the Higher Education Close Up (Preston, England, July 6-8, 1998).
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://brs.leeds.ac.uk/~beiwww/beid.html.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
JOURNAL CIT	Occasional Papers in Communication; n59 Aug 1997
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Discourse; Case Studies; Comparative Education; *Discourse Communities; Foreign Countries; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Masters Degrees; *Writing Assignments; *Writing Evaluation; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS	Open University (Great Britain); *Teacher Writing; University of Sussex (England); Vanderbilt University TN; *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the preliminary stage of a research project examining the kinds of writing that teachers are required to produce as part of their study when undertaking masters-level courses in education. The paper states that of particular interest is the way in which the particular writing these writing teachers do for these courses articulates with their professional experience, expertise, and aspirations. It explains that the research project so far has used the MA in Education program at the Open University as the main case study, analyzing course materials, interviewing MA students and tutors, and analyzing students' written assignments and the feedback they receive from their tutors. The paper states that for comparative purposes, a smaller study was conducted of the MA in Education at the University of Sussex, and a similar study of the MA in Education at Vanderbilt University (USA) will be carried out later. It explains that the project emerged from two quite different starting points--one based on the academic/research significance of academic writing carried out within specific settings and the other based on a personal/professional interest in the issues involved when schoolteachers write for academic purposes. The paper concludes that the project has already benefited from recent advances in theoretical understanding of academic literacy practices and possibly contributed to the further elaboration of a more pluralistic and culturally sensitive perspective on the study of writing in higher education. (Contains 4 tables and 16 references.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 459 467

Mastering Education: A Preliminary Analysis of Academic Literacy Practices within Masters-Level courses in Education.

by Barry Stierer

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. Stierer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS 217 771

Mastering Education:
A preliminary analysis of academic literacy practices within masters-level courses in Education*

Barry Stierer

Paper presented at *Higher Education Close Up*, an international conference from 6-8 July 1998 at University of Central Lancashire, Preston. This conference is jointly hosted by the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University and the Department of Education Studies, University of Central Lancashire and is supported by the Society for Research into Higher Education

Introduction

This paper reports on the preliminary stage of a research project examining the kinds of writing that teachers are required to produce as part of their study of masters-level courses in the field of Education. Of particular interest is the way in which the writing teachers do for these courses articulates with their professional experience, expertise and aspirations. The research project so far has used the MA in Education programme at the Open University as the main case study, analysing course materials, interviewing MA students and tutors, and analysing students' written assignments and the feedback they receive from their tutors. For comparative purposes, a smaller study was conducted of the MA in Education at the University of Sussex, and a similar study of the MA in Education at Vanderbilt University (USA) will be carried out later this year.

The project has emerged from two quite different starting points - one based on the academic/research significance of academic writing carried out within specific settings, and the other based on a personal/professional interest in the issues involved when schoolteachers write for academic purposes. With respect to the first starting point, the project is located within, and seeks to make a contribution to, a growing area of research into aspects of academic writing in higher education based upon a 'critical' perspective on discourse and literacy practices. Until fairly recently, most research into academic writing in higher

---

* © 1997 Barry Stierer: Centre for Language and Communications (The Open University UK) Occasional Papers in Communication, Number 59, August 1997

education was situated within the branch of English Language Teaching called English for Academic Purposes (EAP). EAP offered 'instruction' in the 'skills' of academic writing, mainly to people for whom English was a second or other language, and there have been attempts to research aspects of that field. In similar vein, there have been various attempts to teach 'study skills' to university students, and this too has its own research literature. Most of this work has been based on a 'deficit' model of students' knowledge, and a largely skills-based, utilitarian view of academic writing, which sees such writing as a collection of context-independent and transferable competences underpinned by universal rules.

There has been a more culturally-sensitive body of research in this area accumulating in the United States for some time, led by people like Patricia Bizzell (e.g. Bizzell, 1992) and John Swales (e.g. Swales, 1990). Much of the American work was prompted by the experience of opening up access to higher education in the USA to previously excluded groups, including students whose first language is not English, and the resulting challenge to traditional assumptions about the cultural capital which students in universities are expected to have acquired before arrival.[1] Much, but not all, of the American work tends to be located within what Mary Lea and Brian Street (1997) call the 'academic socialisation' model,[2] which views academic writing as a fairly fixed repertoire of knowledge to which students need to accommodate, rather than anything more dynamic which actually problematises the way in which these practices get constituted and sustained.

Research in this area started to develop in the UK much later, and has tended to have a sharper post-structuralist edge than the American work. Pioneering work of this kind has been carried out at Lancaster University by Ros Ivanic (e.g. Ivanic, in press) and Simon Pardoe (1997), who have in turn been influenced by other work at Lancaster - most notably David Barton's work on literacy (cf Barton 1994) and Norman Fairclough's work on discourse (cf Fairclough 1992). Brian Street and Mary Lea's ESRC-funded project at the University of Sussex, which has examined academic writing from a 'literacy as social

[1] A similar process of expansion in higher education has taken place in the UK in the 1990s, which accounts in part for the rapidly growing interest in the teaching and researching of academic writing over the past few years. It should also be noted that the Open University pioneered open admissions policies in the early 1970s, well before the current wave of expansion. However, the OU's open access applies exclusively to its undergraduate programme, and not therefore to the specific setting of the MA in Education programme featured in the current research project.

practice' perspective (Street and Lea 1996) is another example. In the last five years or so research and scholarship within this perspective has gathered considerable momentum, and the present study represents contribution to it.

As long ago as 1976, Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1976) called for 'an ethnography of the disciplines', by which he meant that there was a need to turn the anthropologist's lens inwards upon the practices of the academy, to explore critically the culture of different subject disciplines. This call has been taken up to some extent, but most of the existing research has examined the traditional academic subjects, and has concentrated almost exclusively either on writing within undergraduate courses or the writing of professional academics. Very little work has been done on academic literacy at postgraduate level, and very little in so-called 'professional' disciplines such as Education. Moreover, it is only recently that the theoretical orientation of this research started to shift. The newer, more dynamic, or 'dialogic', model problematises these practices, and recognises that students' so-called failures as academic writers may be explained by, for example, their struggle to reconcile their own identities, and purposes for studying, with the authority and control of the institution. Research on teachers who are writing within MA in Education programmes, informed by this more critical perspective, builds on this recent work in an under-researched area.

Another field of research and scholarship is pertinent to this investigation, and that is the area of 'professional knowledge', or 'expert knowledge' - and *teachers'* professional knowledge in particular. A lot of work has been done in this area, which is essentially concerned with the relationship between conceptual understanding and professional practice (cf Schön (1983, 1987), Kolb (1984), and Eraut (1994)). It is from this body of work that such widely-used terms as 'the reflective practitioner' has emerged. Sadly, very little of this work examines the the ways in which this professional knowledge is encoded in discourse. My starting point is that it is in the discourse practices, within an area of activity such as teachers' professional development, that the struggles over what constitutes important professional knowledge for teachers gets played through. Nevertheless, the present research has drawn from this area of work as its theoretical framework has evolved. The project can be seen as a contribution to

---

[2] Lea and Street's 'academic socialisation' model occupies the mid-point in a three-model framework they devised, the other two models being the 'study skills' model and the 'academic literacies/discourses' model.

this area insofar as it examines the way in which professional knowledge constitutes, and is constituted in, specialised forms of language.

The other starting point is that this is a form of 'practitioner research' for me. Most of my own professional practice over the past ten years has been located within the Open University's MA in Education programme - as a course tutor, as an academic counsellor for MA students, as a Staff Tutor responsible for the academic progress of MA in Education students and the professional development of MA in Education tutors in my region, and as a member of various course teams within the MA programme, which has involved all aspects of course production and course presentation. I have felt for some time that there is something problematical about the kinds of writing we require MA students to do. I have made various small attempts over the years to address that problem in my work with students and tutors, but never very satisfactorily. There has been a real need for research on the issues surrounding academic writing on our MA, but I had neither the time nor the conceptual tools to make a start. The recent work on academic literacy described above seemed to provide me with the conceptual tools, and a period of study leave provided the time. In professional terms, therefore, I am trying to gain a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding academic writing for our MA students in order to improve both the advice we give to students, and the professional development we offer to tutors.

Issues and questions framing the research

The Open University's MA in Education programme is described as follows in the OU's own prospectus, *Professional Development in Education 1997-98* (Open University, 1997):

> The MA has developed a reputation for being both intellectually challenging and professionally relevant:
>
> - intellectually challenging because you will be asked to address complex issues and come to terms with advanced literature;
>
> - professionally relevant because you will be encouraged constantly to identify the significance of your study for your everyday work and concerns. (p 31)

This description neatly encapsulates the two traditions, or 'orders of discourse' (Fairclough 1989), which I would argue our MA programme - and indeed many MA in Education

programmes - attempt to harmonise. The first of these places particular value on the traditional intellectual competences of 'the academy', at least in the humanities and social sciences: the construction of a *coherent argument*, appropriate *uses of evidence*, the privileging of ***analysis and criticism*** over description, and so on. The latter places particular value on aspects of professional development typically associated with *training*: the ability to *reflect* upon the one's practice, and upon the implications of that reflection for *changing practice*, the ability to demonstrate the *professional relevance* of one's learning, the need to link the outcomes of study to *professional competences*, and the importance of *personal growth, development and change*. Rarely are the powerful expectations encoded in these key concepts unpacked for students: their historical, intellectual and ideological underpinnings, or the operationalisation of them in relation to specific pieces of written work. Whether these competing discourses can ultimately be reconciled has become one of the key issues in the research.

Most teachers studying within an MA programme are doing so - at least in part - for professional reasons. Moreover, the courses are - at least in part - about their professional work. Consequently teachers approach the courses - not unreasonably - with the expectation that their professional experience will provide them with many of the resources needed in order to produce assignments and thereby successfully fulfil assessment requirements. One of the starting points for the research was a suspicion that the conflation of professional discourses with academic discourses, coupled with a lack of explicitness about the way in which students were expected to negotiate these ways of using language, might result in confusion, misunderstanding and sometimes conflict between tutors and students. This problem might be especially acute for those students who do not bring with them to their study of these courses the particular forms of cultural capital which enable other students quickly to identify the discursive ground rules operating within their courses and to produce forms of writing which satisfy these ground rules. A key assumption underpinning the research is that it is within the 'literacy practices' associated with these courses - and especially in the writing requirements - that the two orders of discourse are most acutely focused.

These issues have recently taken on a more urgent political topicality. Funding for these courses has recently been transferred from the Higher Education Funding Council to the new

Teacher Training Agency (TTA), which was mainly set up to oversee the initial training of schoolteachers but is now becoming directly involved in the further professional development of teachers as well. The TTA has produced a discussion paper, which sets out its intention to link all courses of continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers - including masters degree courses - to clearly defined professional competences. Funding of masters degree programmes will be contingent on the ability of universities to persuade the TTA that their courses change teachers' classroom practices. This is part of a wider agenda to remove the influence of universities upon schools, and to remove funding from programmes for teachers which are not overtly vocational (cf Graham 1996). The TTA are developing new vocational qualifications which are like advanced versions of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), such as the new National Professional Headteachers Qualification (NPHQ) and the National Expert Teacher Qualification (NETQ). Teachers will be able to get tax credits if they register for these kinds of qualifications, as opposed to the more general academic awards like MAs. This tension, between the 'academic' and the 'professional', is therefore being played out on the policy stage at the same time that I am researching that tension within specific programmes.

Finally, there are issues of access to these masters programmes which in some ways mirror the access issues that are often discussed in the context of academic literacy within university undergraduate courses. There has been a gradual relaxation in the admission requirements to masters programmes for teachers, at the Open University and elsewhere. An increasing number of applicants without a first degree or equivalent are being admitted to these programmes, either on the strength of sustained 'professional experience', or by studying individual parts of masters programmes in fulfillment of an Advanced Diploma award. The cumulative result of these changes is that tutors find an increasing number of their students do not have the kind of academic background which was previously assumed. Their perception is that this has placed new and additional pressures upon them to teach aspects of academic writing as well as the course itself.

In the context of the Open University, there is an additional access issue, in that our MA in Education programme has spread rapidly outside the UK in the past few years - mainly in Ireland and continental western Europe. An increasing number of our MA students will be studying our materials in a language other than their first language. Their understanding of

the ground rules of academic work will be closely bound up with their understandings of, for example, the position of the student and the tutor within the learning process, the nature of 'knowledge', and the purpose of MA study. All these will be constructed culturally, and will vary considerably. Whilst it is no longer possible for course teams even to presume to have an understanding of the cultural, linguistic, academic and professional backgrounds of students in the MA programme, the advice on writing contained in our course materials has remained largely unchanged. My own view is that the OU has a responsibility to make these ground rules *especially* explicit, in view of its more remote relationship with its students, but there is little advice contained in our materials about the ground rules of academic writing.

With this range of issues in mind, the research was framed by the following research questions:

- What are the expectations and requirements of masters-level courses for teachers, with respect to academic writing?
- How explicit are these expectations and requirements in, for example, printed course materials?
- How are these expectations and requirements mediated through the advice and feedback given to students by their tutors?
- What are students' perceptions of these expectations and requirements as they progress through their MA studies?
- How are these writing practices embedded in the wider practices of teaching and learning within the institution?
- How do the these writing practices constitute and sustain forms of 'professional knowledge'?

The position of MA in Education programmes

MA in Education programmes occupy an important position within the professional culture of teachers. In the mid- to late-1990s, it is difficult (though not impossible) for a teacher to be appointed to a senior management post in schools and colleges without a masters degree, and there is a widespread perception that the function of the MA degree in the job market is as an absolute discriminator. There was an explosion of MA programmes for teachers in UK

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

universities and polytechnics through the 1980s. This was partly a form of 'qualification inflation', which followed the push for an all-graduate profession in the 1970s. It was also part of a longer-term professionalisation of the teaching profession, as teachers increasingly argued for parity with the established professions such as doctors, lawyers, accountants, architects and so on. Interestingly, the growth in programmes offering masters degrees to teachers in the 1980s coincided almost exactly with the decline in financial sponsorship for teachers doing such courses, with the devolution of funding from local authorities to schools, and with the general contraction of funding for the education system. So, teachers in their thousands register each year for masters degrees, and are moreover prepared to pay for them out of their own pockets.

In fact, in the past 15 years, something like 40,000 UK teachers have been awarded masters degrees in Education. The Open University launched its MA in Education programme in 1987, and in the ten intervening years has awarded something like 6,000 MA degrees. In fact, we are now beginning to see the next stage in the evolution of academic/professional qualifications for teachers offered by higher education institutions. Most universities are now developing Doctorate in Education (EdD) programmes, following on from a fairly established pattern in North America, which are equivalent to PhDs but with a sizeable taught component and an overt professional emphasis.

Most MA in Education programmes require applicants to have a reasonable first degree or an equivalent qualification. Some require applicants to have a minimum number of years' teaching experience (typically between three and five). Increasingly teachers without first degrees can enter MA programmes by means of an Advanced Diploma route rather than through a bachelor's degree. These masters programmes are either specialist programmes (for example, in management, or special needs, or curriculum studies), or they are general modular programmes which allow some form of specialisation within them. There is often a research component within the programme. Some require students to produce a dissertation, and some require students to sit formal examinations.

The Open University MA in Education programme

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The MA in Education programme at the Open University is a modular programme. Students typically choose any three modules in order to complete their degrees. In 1997 there are 18 modules in the programme (see Table 1 overleaf).

- Education, training and employment
- Gender issues in education: equality and difference
- Curriculum, learning and assessment
- Child development in social context
- Language and literacy in social context
- Developing inclusive curricula: equality and diversity in education
- Adult learners: education and training
- Mentoring
- Educational management in action
- Understanding school management
- Effective leadership and management in education
- Primary education: the basic curriculum
- Primary education: assessing and planning learning
- Science education
- Technology education
- Researching mathematics classrooms
- Educational research methods
- Educational research in action

Table 1

Modules in the Open University's MA in Education programme, 1997

Each module differs in the way it organises its materials, and in the way students' progress is assessed. Some modules require students to carry out practical activities in schools; some place greater weight upon students' understanding and analysis of issues and concepts discussed in the course materials. Some require students to take a formal final examination, and all of them contain some element of research.

Analysis

In order to attempt to answer the research questions identified earlier, the project was organised around four strands of analysis:

1. Analysis of 'types' of writing required across the MA programme.
2. Text analysis of Tutor-Marked Assignment (TMA) questions, including any explicit advice on aspects of academic writing in TMA booklets.
3. Issues arising from interviews with MA students and tutors.
4. Issues arising from analysis of students' assignments (and tutors' feedback).

Strand 1: Analysis of 'types' of writing required across the MA programme[3]

This strand began with an 'inventory' of the types of writing required across the MA programme by analysing the way each assignment on each module is represented in the 18 Assignment Booklets. This required scrutiny of over 100 specifications for written assignments across the programme.

This strand of analysis revealed that, depending on the three modules a student chooses to study, they may be expected to produce a very wide range of types of writing. Table 2 provides a list merely of the types of writing, or *genre categories*, required for written assignments across the 18 modules in the programme.

Module	Types of writing required					
E817 Education, training & employment	Essay	Project proposal	Essay	Project report	Exam	
E826 Gender issues in education	Essay	Essay plan	Essay	Critical literature review or pilot study	Project plan	Project report --- Exam
E819 Curriculum, learning and assessment	Prelim. statement/ rationale	Situational analysis	Curric developmt plan	Extended essay	Implemen-tation plan	Exam
E820 Child development	Essay	Critical book review	Small-scale study proposal	Small-scale study report	Essay	Exam
E825 Language and literacy	Essay	Text analysis	Essay	Project proposal	Essay	Project report --- Exam

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

[3] All references to specifications for written assignments are taken from assignment booklets for the 18 modules in the Open University's MA in Education programme in 1997 (Open University, 1997).

E829 Developing inclusive curricula	Project proposal	Project report	Project proposal	Project report	Project proposal	Project report
E827 Adult learners	Essay	Project proposal	Essay	Project report	Exam	
E830 Mentoring	Situational analysis	Case study	Case study	Project outline	Project report	
E828 Educational management in action	Project proposal	Project report	Project proposal	Project report	Project proposal	Project report
E834 Understanding school management	Essay	Essay	Report plan	Manage-ment report		
E838 Effective leadership and management in education	Self-assessmnt of mang. develp't needs	Managmnt activity plan	Report on strategic managmnt	Reflective report on the managmnt activity	Exam	
E832 Primary ed: the basic curriculum	Essay	Personal per-spective	Lesson plan/ analysis	Lesson plan/ analysis	Lesson observtn/ analysis	Plan + Project report
E833 Primary ed: assessing and planning learning	Personal position	Project report	Personal position	Project plan	Outline plan	Project report
ES821 Science education	Descrptn /analysis	Descrptn /analysis	Report	Report	Descrptn /analysis + critical appraisal	Exam
E823 Technology ed.	Essay	Analysis	Analysis	Investigatn	Evaluation	
ME822 Researching mathematics classrooms	Personal account + critical review	Descrptn /analysis + critical review	Descrptn /analysis + critical review	Descrptn /analysis	Descrptn /analysis	Essay ---------- Project report
E824 (30pts) Educational research methods	Essay	Critical evaluation of article	Essay			
E835 Educational research in action	Research topic outline	Essay	Assessmnt of article	First draft research proposal + pilot study plan	Final draft research proposal + report on pilot study	Exam

Table 2
Open University MA in Education programme, 1997
Genre categories for written assignments - by course

The information in Table 2 is aggregated below in Table 3:

Essay	19
Project report	16
Other kind of project reports (e.g. small-scale studies, pilot studies)	3
Project proposal/plan	16
Other kinds of proposals/plans	2
Examination	10
Critical/comparative review of article/book/etc	9
Description/analysis of classroom-based activity or lesson	16
Description/analysis of other practical/professional activity (e.g. management activity, curriculum development programme)	7
Personal/reflexive statements or positions	7
Description/analysis of own professional situation	3
Case study	2
Text analysis	1

Table 3
MA in Education programme
Genre categories for written assignments
by genre type

These are very superficial analyses of the diversity of types of writing students are required to carry out within the MA programme. Nevertheless, from this it is clear that an individual student's programme of three modules could require them to produce as many as a dozen different types of writing. What these labels, like 'essay' or 'project report', mean varies from module to module, and even within individual modules, even when the same generic label is used. So it is only really by looking at individual assignment specifications that the meaning of these labels becomes clearer. Nevertheless, with such an array of writing types across the programme it is hardly surprising that some students find it difficult to build up a sense of confidence in their ability to write academically as they move from one assignment to the next, and from one module to the next.

To give an indication of the kinds of written assignments denoted by these labels, Table 4 below provides four examples of 'essay' assignments from four different modules. Whilst

there is variation in the style of academic writing suggested by even these four examples, they are all recognisable as fairly conventional essay specifications, drawing upon academic traditions principally in the social sciences.

From 'Education, employment and training', Assignment 01, Question 1

Examine the view that since the economic crises of the 1970s, the political and economic agendas for education and training have been dominated by an 'economic instrumentalism' in which a prime objective has been to increase political control over educational practitioners and institutions. What would you say have been the main consequences of this policy for the development of vocational education and training?

From 'Gender issues in education', Assignment 01, Question 3

How does this definition of 'hegemonic masculinity' help us to understand the way that subordinated masculinities and feminity are constructed?

From 'Child development in social context', STMA02 Quesion 1

Critically evaluate the contribution that Dunn's book, *The beginnings of social understanding*, has made to our understanding of child development and how to promote it.

From, 'Adult learners, education and training', Assignment 03, Question 1

'A discourse of adult learning embraces leisure opportunities, education and training and does away with élitist distinctions between them.' Critically examine this contention and the consequences for the provision of learning opportunities for adults.

Table 4
MA in Education programme
Examples of 'essay-style' questions

Strand 2: Text analysis of Tutor-Marked Assignment (TMA) questions, including any explicit advice on aspects of academic writing in TMA booklets

In this strand of the research, a text analysis was carried out on the wording of each assignment question in the Assignment Booklets for the 18 modules in the programme, as

well as any guidance notes produced by course teams which aim to 'unpack' the question. This has been a largely heuristic exercise, informed by the kinds of issues discussed earlier. After a preliminary analysis of these texts, four categories of text features were identified as significant:

- Any explicit explanation of the generic conventions the student is expected to use

Of interest here was any evidence of explicit advice offered by course teams, within assignment questions or in accompanying guidance notes, on aspects of structure, style, assumed audience and preferred 'voice'. This arose from an early hypotheses, *viz.* that the 'ground rules' for particular pieces of writing are rarely made explicit to students. Hence of interest were any instances where advice is given on the 'type' of writing required for a TMA, in relation to the course team's academic history and notions of what 'good' writing comprises.

- Ways in which students' professional work as teachers is referred to, and ways in which students are advised to refer to their own professional work.

Of interest here was evidence of course teams' expectations of the ways in which students should and should not draw upon their own professional experience when answering the question or completing the task assigned. This would include any indications of how students should or should not identify the implications of their argument or analysis for their own professional work. This arose from interest in the way that professional and academic traditions are played through in the requirements for writing. This feature of the language was examined in order to see how different course teams handled the tension between these two traditions.

- Ways in which the assignment questions appear to position students with respect to ideas in the course

Of interest here was the use of such discursive devices as nominalisation (denoting objectification and detachment), active or passive voice, variations in modality and agency, and so on. These features were identified as significant because some courses appeared implicitly to expect the student to position themselves fairly remotely from the issues in the

course: the issues are 'out there', to be studied and understood, and the student's own personal/professional response is not strictly warrantable as an outcome. Other courses seemed implicitly to expect the student to position themselves at the very heart of the course: what is principally warrantable is the professional 'payoff', and the student who is not able to demonstrate that their practice has changed as a result of their study is at a disadvantage. Indeed most courses implicitly contained some elements of both of these, leaving students understandably uncertain about their personal position in relation to issues in the course. A further assumption was that assignments which demanded detachment were located in a more 'academic' tradition, and the assignments which demanded involvement were located in a more 'professional' tradition. Norman Fairclough's system for describing discourse was used in order to identify key features which encoded these ideas, such as nominalisation, modality and agency.

- Uses of imperatives

Of interest here was the way instructions were expressed by course teams - these being indications of the way in which the assignment 'task' is perceived.

Explicit advice on writing

This strand of analysis revealed that, in relation to the first of the four features of the assignment wording (explicit advice on writing), most advice on writing was concerned with structure (e.g. suggestions on how to sequence elements of the text) and coverage (e.g. which readings should be drawn upon in answering the question) rather than on appropriate forms and uses of language for the piece of writing in question. With one or two exceptions no attempt was made to describe and account for the course team's notion of 'good writing' - let alone any attempt made to problematise it. A small number exceptions to this pattern were found. For example, the 'Child development' team attempted to define its expectations in the following ways:

> 'Assignments 01, 02 and 05 are *conventional essay questions*' (my italics) (p 3)
>
> 'Avoid being simply descriptive or prescriptive. This is an MA course, which demands critical analysis as well as a display of understanding of the course material. A string of summaries of relevant bits of the Study Guide and readings is not acceptable' (p 3)

The 'Child development' team explicitly favours a more detached writing style:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

'Write impersonally: as far as possible avoid first person pronouns' (p 16),

whereas the 'Adult learners' team adopts a contrasting position

> 'It is quite acceptable to write in the first person, but you should avoid personalized anecdotes, and will be penalized for rambling or unclear passages' (p 18).

It should be emphasised that, whilst the contrast between these two pieces of advice may be noteworthy, they are the only two instances across the 18 modules where the question of 'voice' is explicitly considered at all.

Finally, with only one exception there is no acknowledgment of the differences between course teams in what they expect in this respect. The 'Effective leadership and management in education' team offers this advice to students about the important differences between the writing style expected for 'management reports' and the kinds of academic writing students may have been required to produce on other courses:

> It is important to understand that the E838 assignments are reports on management rather than academic essays. We have found from past experience that some students do not achieve as high a grade as they might have, had they appreciated the difference between these two types of writing. When writing an academic essay students are sometimes tempted to display their erudition by splicing together numerous quotations from academic authors and using a lot of academic jargon. This style prevents the writer from developing and communicating his or her own ideas in a clear and logical structure. It is not suited to the intended audience for a management report, and should be avoided (p 18).

It should be noted in passing that this advice could be accused of lampooning to some extent the expectations conventionally associated with academic essay-writing. The sarcastic tone adopted when describing the way students 'are sometimes tempted to display their erudition' is not a description that would be universally recognised as one of 'best practice', even for academic essays. Moreover, there is an assumption that achieving clarity and logic is merely a matter of avoiding an over-dependence on quotations and the use of academic jargon. This point notwithstanding, the passage is significant for the purposes of this analysis in the sense that it represents the only attempt in any of the 18 assignment booklets to recognise explicitly the fact that students may be approaching the course with a set of assumptions about academic writing that differs from the expectations for 'Effective leadership and management in education', based on their previous experience of study, and to point out some of the differences between management reports and academic essays.

Reference to professional work

Analysis of this feature of assignment questions revealed wide variations between modules (and to some extent within modules) in the way students are expected to represent their professional work when writing assignments. In some modules (notably 'Education, training and employment', 'Child development', 'Language and literacy', and 'Gender issues in education') students are expected to keep to a minimum any discussion of profesional development achieved as a result of study - though no advice is given on how to construct this linguistically. The examples of essay-style questions given in Table 4 above provides an indication of the way in which students' professional work is referred to (if at all) in these modules. There is clearly no expectation underlying these assignments that students are expected to, or even able to, draw upon professional experience as teachers in order to attempt, and succeed at, the writing task. Indeed for most modules in this category there is an implication that students would be penalised if they include more than a passing reference to their professional work when constructing their assignments.

In other modules (notably 'Science education', 'Mathematics education', 'Mentoring', 'Primary education' (I and II), 'Effective leadership and management in education') students are expected to make visible the professional knowledge they have achieved through their study of the course - though no advice is given on how to construct this linguistically. 'Mentoring', for example, represents the relationship between the student's professional activity and the writing task in this way:

> Project 4 is designed to help you look back in a structured manner over the experience of mentoring, and then to look forward to possible developments arising out of that experience.
>
> In steps 1-4 you are asked to provide a critical review of the mentoring programme you have been involved in from the perspetive of: the institution; the mentee; and your own professional development.
>
> In step 5 you are asked to examine the concept of the 'mentoring school' and explore the potential for mentoring in other staff development processes within your institution.
>
> You are required to locate your discussion within the wider educational debates on mentoring by referring to the research and literature in the field, such as are indicated in the Study Guide. In addition, you are encouraged to provide evidence from your own mentoring experience in support of your conclusions (p 14).

The eight remaining modules lie somewhere between these two poles on the professional-academic continuum. Nevertheless, this aspect of the analysis clearly shows that, as students move from one module to another, they are required to negotiate possibly substantial shifts in the way they are expected to relate their studies to their professional work when writing assignments, and that these shifts are almost entirely left unacknowledged in the assignment booklets.

Positioning of students

Here too, there were wide variations between modules (and to some extent within modules) in the way students are expected to position themselves with respect to ideas in the course. Perhaps predictably, there was a close correspondence between the way modules divide in the 'academic/professional' distinction above, and the way they divide in the 'detachment/ involvement' distinction. The same modules identified in the preceding section, which expected students to keep to a minimum any discussion of profesional development achieved as a result of study, showed significantly more usage of nominalisations, passive voice, indirect address to the student (i.e. no explicit indication of agency) and (possibly surprisingly) tentative forms of modality (e.g. 'perhaps', 'might'). Moreover, the modules identified in the preceding section, which expected students to make visible the professional knowledge they have achieved through their study of the course, used fewer nominalisations, more active voice, more explicit agency in the way the student is addressed (e.g. 'you', 'your') and more assertive forms of modality (e.g. 'you should'). Although this result may suggest that the two categories of analysis could be conflated in future analyses, it is nevertheless noteworthy that there should be such a close correspondence between the way course teams refer to students' professional work and the way students are positioned, within specifications for written assignments.

Use of imperatives

At issue here was not *whether* assignment booklets made use of imperative forms (they all did, in abundance), but the specific kinds of imperatives adopted. The list below represents a selection from the some 50 different imperative forms found in the 18 assignment booklets:

Examine	Outline	Write a report
Consider	Critically examine	Apply the model
Critically evaluate	Critically discuss	Report what happens
Describe	Construct a conceptual	when you apply your
Analyse	framework	chosen model
Make a plan	Rank	Critically appraise
Justify	Assess	Choose an educational
Explain	Reflect on	setting
Suggest	Evaluate	Write a critical account
Prepare an outline	Describe and analyse	Outline one key outcome
Provide a report	Give a brief description	
Critically reflect	Comment on	

These kinds of instructions will typically appear in assignment booklets, either within the main rubric of the assignment question, or within guidance notes accompanying the question. No pattern could be found in the way these imperatives were distributed across the modules, although the more overtly 'professional' modules showed a slight tendency to use a wider range of imperatives than the 'academic' modules. All modules were very similar, however, in their reluctance to define these imperatives. With only one or two exceptions, the course team's ideas about how to go about following such instructions is not made explicit, and yet these imperatives represent key indicators of the kind of writing task the student is expected to undertake. This remarkable range of instructions provides clear evidence of the taken-for-grantedness with which academic teams approach the task of preparing assignments, as well as the complexity of the 'code' which students need to crack in order to complete their assignments successfully. How, for example, should students understand the differences between 'critically evaluate', 'critically examine', 'critically discuss', and 'critically appraise'?

Strand 3: Issues arising from interviews with MA students and tutors

For this strand a small number of Open University MA in Education tutors and students in the OU's London Region were interviewed in the spring of 1997. The tutors and students were identified first of all by identifying those modules which appeared to be especially interesting in relation to the main issues in the research, based on the foregoing analysis of assignment booklets and my previous knowledge of the courses. The tutors of those courses were then targetted, and I wrote to them, inviting them to be interviewed. I then wrote to selected students in current tutorial groups of those tutors who agreed to be interviewed. Students

were selected that had already studied for at least one year, so that the interview could include discussion of their experience of negotiating the writing requirements of different modules.

It should be borne in mind that these are largely self-selected interviewees. The tutors who were interviewed appeared to be enthusiasts with more than a passing interest in issues of language and assessment. The students interviewed appeared to be fairly confident and successful students who were also interested in the issues being researched. They were moreover enthusiastic advocates of the Open University in general and the MA programme in particular. Although their enthusiasm did not prevent them from admitting to real struggles they had had as students, and to real criticisms of individual tutors and course teams, their enthusiasm and loyalty meant that all of them were almost ideal interviewees. They spoke freely and in detail about their experience and their feelings. They were highly motivated to help me with my research, and they wanted to be kept informed of how it progressed.

Also interviewed at this time were four students studying within the MA in Education programme at the University of Sussex, as well as their tutor.

At this stage in the research project the interviews with tutors have not yet been analysed at all, and the interviews with students have not been analysed in detail. It is therefore only possible to summarise some of the main patterns in the student interviews, based on a preliminarly analysis of interview notes and a first listen-through of the tape recordings. From this preliminary analysis the following points emerged:

- All interviewees had clear professional motives for beginning the MA, though some had developed more personal intellectual motives after beginning.
- Most students conceptualised their MA studies as a form of further training.
- Few students had had recent experience of academic writing when they started.
- All students, without exception, represented the writing requirements for individual MA modules principally in terms of their tutors' standards, preferences and requirements, rather than those of the course team.
- The most successful students started from scratch, in their attempt to puzzle out the ground rules for academic writing, each time they moved to a new module. Less successful students tried to apply the approaches they developed in one module to

subsequent modules. There was little sense of cumulative 'progress' in their development as academic writers, except on a very general level of 'confidence' and 'practice'.

- No matter how positive the students' experience, and no matter how 'successful' they had been, they still had no meta-language for discussing vital aspects of academic writing. Terms like 'argument', 'critical' and 'analysis', which were often used in course materials and by their tutors in TMA feedback, were still largely mysterious to them.

- No matter how positive the students' experience, and no matter how 'successful' they had been, they still felt unsure about appropriate ways to express personal viewpoints, and how to draw upon their professional work, in their writing.

- Generally speaking, students expressed a preference for writing tasks which required them to report on something practical, and where they felt that they had gained new professional knowledge as a result.

- All students would have valued more advice on academic writing from individual course teams and tutors.

- Feedback from tutors was frequently cited as a source of help with writing, though most of this advice referred to structure, layout or coverage, rather than more discursive features.

Strand 4: Analysis of students' assignment and feedback from tutors

The students interviewed were very helpful in allowing me to make photocopies of the assignments they had written for the MA so far, including their tutors' feedback on the script of the assignment and on the assessment cover sheet (PT3 form). Although only a relatively small number of students were interviewed, this data is quite substantial. These assignments, and the interview data, will be subjected to a much more detailed analysis a little later in the year.

Conclusion

Although the analysis is still at an early stage, the project has already benefited from recent advances in theoretical understanding of academic literacy practices, and at the same time contributed in a small way to the further elaboration of a more pluralistic and culturally-sensitive perspective on the study of writing in higher education. The considerable range of genres of academic writing which confront MA students in the course of their studies, and the variety of ways students are expected (often inexplicitly) to represent their developing

professional knowledge, demonstrates that this is a fruitful site for research of this kind. The MA in Education programme at the Open University seems to have achieved a great deal in identifying the kinds of professional knowledge which teachers are expected to gain through their studies, but we have imported into that learning experience forms of writing from other learning domains - typically from academic disciplines such as sociology and psychology - which constrain teachers' ability to construct professional knowledge for themselves. We have not been imaginative enough when inventing the writing tasks demanded of students, in order to offer genres of academic writing to MA students which provide real support for professional learning, and we certainly have not problematised our own assumptions about academic writing in our advice to students and our work with tutors. The next stage of the project should provide clear directions to enable our MA programme, and others like it, to raise the awareness of students and tutors about the relationship between forms of writing and professional knowledge in order to remove some of the guesswork from the process of meeting the writing requirements of courses, and to help teachers to achieve more effective professional learning through their studies.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Val McGregor, Sandy Sieminski and Margaret Bird, School of Education Staff Tutors in the Open University's London Regional Office, for their co-operation and assistance with the arrangements for interviewing tutors and students. I am also indebted to the following people who have provided valuable advice at various stages of the project: Neil Mercer, Janet Maybin, Mary Lea, Barbara Mayor, Fiona Leach, Harry Torrance, Ros Ivanic, Simon Pardoe, Mary Russell and Dorothy Sheridan.

References

Barton, D. (1994) *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Bizzell, P. (1992) *Academic discourse and critical consciousness.* Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Eraut, M. (1994) *Developing professional knowledge and competence.* London: The Falmer Press.

Fairclough, N. (1989) *Language and power*. Harlow: Longman.

Fairclough, N. (1992) *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Geertz, C. (1976) 'Toward an ethnography of the disciplines'. Mimeo: Princeton Institute for Advanced Study. Quoted in: Beecher, T. (1989) *Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press.

Graham, J. (1996) 'The Teacher Training Agency, continuing professional development policy and the definition of competences for serving teachers'. *British Journal of In-service Education, Vol 22 No 2*, 121-132.

Ivanic, R. (in press) *Writing and identity: The discoursal construction of identity in academic writing*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lea, M. and Street, B. (1997) 'New forms of student writing: theoretical perspectives'. Seminar presentation, University of Sussex, June.

The Open University (1997) *Professional development in education 1997-98*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

The Open University (various dates) Assignment booklets for modules in the MA in Education programme. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Pardoe, S. (1997) *Writing professional science: Genre, recontextualisation and empiricism in the learning of professional and scientific writing within an Msc course in Environmental Impact Assessment*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Lancaster.

Schön, D. (1983) *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.

Schön, D. (1987) *Education the reflective practitioner: Towards a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Swales, J. (1990) *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE